

“Of my own accord”: Milton’s Dialogue with the Rabbis in *Samson Agonistes*

by

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This thesis examines rabbinic commentaries on the Samson story and the ways in which Milton appropriates or differs from these interpretations. It considers the critical debate over whether Samson’s character and violent life are justified and seeks to reconcile critics who justify Samson with those who vilify him. It argues that seeing Samson as a type of Christ, but an incomplete type, at least partially obviates this dissension by making Samson sinful while also allowing his final action to serve the will of God.



“Of my own accord”: Milton’s Dialogue with the Rabbis in *Samson Agonistes*

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by

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents and grandparents, to whom I owe my education, and to my sister, whose zeal for truth has reminded me of my own first love.

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I would like to thank my thesis director, David Wilson-Okamura, and the others on my committee, Thomas Herron and Jeffrey Johnson. Their support has kept me focused and intellectually honest.

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## Introduction

Most recent criticism of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* considers whether the violence that characterizes Samson's life is justified. Critics tend to judge Samson's violence either as regenerative—because of his willingness to die—or as hopelessly degenerative—because of his transgressions of Mosaic Law. Most of these critics, however, fail to consider Milton's complicated relationship with Judaism, especially with rabbinic interpretations of the Samson story. Considering Milton's dialogue with the rabbis in his closet drama demonstrates that the critical dissension over Samson's character operates in a false dichotomy. Rather than judging Samson's final actions by Samson's character, it is more instructive and more in the spirit of both Milton's sources and (as Clay Daniel has noted) the concept of a Christian drama to judge the temple holocaust by its effects.

Unlike criticism focusing solely on *Samson Agonistes*, Milton criticism in general has many studies on Milton's possible exposure to rabbinic commentaries. Harris Fletcher investigates the Jewish texts to which Milton may have had access, including the most notable rabbinic commentators: Ibn Ezra (c. 1092-1167), Rashi (1040-1105), Maimonides (abbreviated in commentaries as Rambam; 1135-1204), David Kimchi (abbreviated Radak; 1160-1235), and Gersonides (abbreviated Ralbag; 1288-1344).<sup>1</sup>

The most popular of these commentators is unquestionably Rashi (whose name is an acronym for Rabbi Shelmo Yitshaki); his commentary combines the literal readings, that is, the *peshat*, of the Tanakh and Talmud with the more interpretive method of reading (by using Jewish folklore), called *derash* ("Rashi" 635). Thus, his comments are comprehensive of the rabbinical

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<sup>1</sup> The commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra are contained in the Buxtorf Bible, which Milton probably read (Fletcher 25 and n. 1). Before the Buxtorf Bible was the Bomberg Bible, which "text, more than any other, has influenced all subsequent rabbinical Bibles" and includes, in its many editions, works by all the rabbis listed above (55-57). Although Milton references Maimonides, he references the rabbi's interpretations of the Oral, rather than the Written, Torah (8, 55, 238).

techniques and fundamental to successive commentators. Because they have been popular from the time of their authorship and are still popular today, his comments border on being considered canonical in Judaism (635).

The second most popular commentator, Abraham Ibn Ezra, lived with the exile complex of his nation (“Ibn Ezra” 384). Unlike Rashi, this rabbi preferred to use *peshat*, often giving very terse commentary with little explanation; thus, he consciously distinguished himself from Karaites, who demonstrated “an unqualified acceptance of both the Oral and the Written Law” and from Christians and other commentators who looked for allegorical meanings (385).

David Kimchi was also celebrated during his lifetime. He defended Maimonides against other rabbis who charged the Aristotelian author of the *Mishneh Torah* with excessive rationalism (“David Kimhi” 458). Despite his frequent apologetics in favor of Judaism’s superiority over Christianity, Kimchi had an ironically significant influence on Renaissance Protestantism (458). Despite his references to current events, he continued to be influential in Bible scholarship long after his death, and his comments are still included in rabbinic Bibles (458).

Moses Maimonides is most famous for his commentary on the Torah, titled *Mishneh Torah*, and his *Guide for the Perplexed*. Maimonides was “the leading intellectual figure of medieval Judaism,” the compiler of “one of the most important compendia of Jewish law of all ages” (“Maimonides” 493), and a figure revered by those who knew him personally (494). His *Mishneh* considers philosophical or ethical problems that may have plagued Jews reading the Torah (495).

A final important rabbinic commentator is Gersonides, whose full name is Levi Ben Gershom. Gersonides wrote a commentary on most of the Tanakh, following in the rationalist

footsteps of Maimonides (“Levi Ben Gershom” 474). So much did he admire Maimonides, in fact, that he wrote a book devoted to addressing issues the earlier rabbi had not fully considered (474).

This study relies mostly on Rashi and Kimchi for biblical commentary, although Gersonides’ commentary is also useful at times. Maimonides appears infrequently, usually for the sake of his legal interpretations. References to the Bible in English are from the King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

## Literature Review

R.W. Serjeantson describes the critical discussion on Samson's character by considering the final "temple holocaust." He argues that the holocaust can be seen in a positive light if it is "a typological indication of Samson's regeneration, or an emblem of hope for godly Nonconformists experiencing persecution by a Philistine prelatical party, and for quiescent but attentive republicans" (613-4). Alternatively, Samson's final act may be negative if seen "as destructive, fallen, and perhaps also ultimately suggestive of the failure of the Good Old Cause" (614).<sup>2</sup>

Serjeantson eventually sides with the regenerationist view of Samson. He uses more primary sources than some critics—often commentaries on the book of Judges—but the commentaries on which he relies are Latin translations of Christian authors, and he is careful to always give the Latin terms he uses from his sources. Some common names in his footnotes are Pareus, Vermigli, Piscator, and Bucer, all of whom wrote in Latin in the Renaissance. The language of Serjeantson's primary research reveals the classical sources and concepts that influence his interpretation, as does the fact that his rebuttal against Joseph Wittreich relies on how "early-modern interpreters of Judges" would see the concerns Wittreich raises.

Part of the tendency of critical consideration to focus primarily on classical and Christian sources is due, probably, to the fact that, in the note on tragedy that begins the drama, Milton mentions classical Greek tragedians and "David Paraeus" (14). Because of this reference to an early modern theologian, Camille Slights, for example, interprets *Samson* through the lens of casuistry, arguing that Samson ends his life as a hero because he has learned to rely on himself to

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly representative of the negative camp is John Carey's article comparing Samson to the 9/11 suicide bombers. Carey especially attacks the reading of Stanley Fish, whose perspective, he says, "belongs to a world we have outgrown" (16).

judge right from wrong and to act on his own conscience. Slight's draws on very few primary sources, but those she does use are Renaissance texts on moral reasoning.

Likewise, Phillip Donnelly's references in his chapter on *Samson* include Augustine's *City of God* and two works by David Pereus, but no citations from the Hebrew Scriptures. Also a regenerationist, Donnelly reads Milton as arguing for Protestant religious tolerance, and that focus leads him to appropriate the lens of Christian readings of the Samson story and of the issues of post-Restoration England. Picking up the theme of right reason that so strongly influences critical interpretations of Milton, Donnelly argues that "'reason,' divine and human, is the poetic gift of peaceful difference....a capacity for faithful otherness....reason enables human participation in a goodness and beauty that precedes and shall outlast the effects of the Fall" (3). To Donnelly, Milton, as aware as he is of his intellectual superiority and convinced as he is of his being right, sees the very ability to reason as an ability to accept difference and live with "limited religious toleration among Protestants" (21). Thus, Donnelly also reads *Samson* in a more complex way. He ultimately sides with a positive interpretation of the drama's protagonist, but he does so by focusing on Samson's willingness to die, not to kill.

In claiming Milton for the cause of religious toleration, Donnelly perhaps thinks of *De Doctrina* XI.ii, in which Milton describes a Christian's duty toward others. Milton lists as the first duty charity. In his explanation of charity, however, Milton cautions against hypocritical charity and inordinate charity (742-43). Similarly, he calls hatred the opposite of charity, but also mentions instances of hatred as "a religious duty, as when we hate the enemies of God or of the church" (743). Of course, Milton's defenses of regicide also give a different idea from that Donnelly wishes to stress of acceptable force in the cause of religion. Both Donnelly (4) and

Elizabeth Sauer (326 ff), however, acknowledge that Milton's conception of toleration is drastically more limited than the modern conception.

Michael Lieb's important work, *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (1994), argues that violence accomplishes both destruction and rebirth. Lieb puts *Samson* in the context of the violent attacks Milton had endured at the hands of Peter Du Moulin's tracts denouncing England's regicide. Lieb calls these tracts not only *ad hominem*, but "ad corporam" (160), saying that they dissemble Milton's body and attack his blindness, leaving Milton the task of reasserting the integrity and wholeness of his physique. In his conclusion, Lieb discusses *Samson* directly, ultimately positing that the protagonist of the drama achieves, through the sparagmos of the temple holocaust, the "restitution" Milton had sought during the tract wars (262). Despite his compelling readings, however, Lieb deals mostly with Milton's previous uses of the character of Samson, not with Judges or the redactor's co-religionist interpreters.

John T. Shawcross begins to bridge the gap between the positive and negative critics by choosing a side only tentatively. He argues for the ambiguity of the drama in a book appropriately titled *The Uncertain World of Samson Agonistes* (2001). His chapter on the character of Samson acknowledges the critical dissension, intentionally avoiding any flattening of the debate, but ultimately conceiving the protagonist as one who exercises free will in order to return to obedience to God (64). His primary sources include *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*.

This heavy focus on Christian and classical thought is not symptomatic of the positive critics only. Scholars troubled by Samson's violence also research mostly Latin texts and Christian interpretations. For example, Clay Daniel argues (1994) that Samson's lust and violence bring the judge's punishment upon his own head and that the drama shows, through the

moral weakness of its protagonist and the ultimate fulfillment of a prophecy, how tragedy can exist in a Christian world. Daniel's endnotes refer to many secondary sources, but they mention the book of Judges only once. In fact, Daniel seems to consider *Paradise Lost* his most reliable primary resource other than *Samson*.<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that no scholars have considered the potential for Jewish thought to influence Milton's portrayal of Samson. Joseph Wittreich, the foremost critic in the negative camp, spends two chapters of *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* discussing the drama in the context of the book of Judges. In a sophisticated argument, Wittreich claims that Milton stands in the same relation to Judges as the redactor stood to his sources when he wrote Judges. In order to make his argument, Wittreich does indeed draw on Scripture, but he relies on modern historical studies (such as Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*) to characterize the attitude of the Judges author to his story.

The progenitor of the studies considering Jewish influence on *Samson Agonistes* is Marta Shapiro's 1974 dissertation entitled "*Samson Agonistes* and the Hebraic Tradition." In order to demonstrate how "Hebraic" *Samson* is, Shapiro points out thirteen concepts that the drama shares with Jewish tradition. The most convincing of these concepts that can impact a judgment of Samson are those of the covenant, the servant of God (*Eved Ha-Shem*), the judge (*Shophet*), the desecration of God's name (*Chillul Ha-Shem*). Shapiro's argument draws on significant portions of the Hebrew Scriptures and on Jewish commentators like Maimonides and Rashi.

Shapiro makes some grandiose claims. For example, she claims that Milton, by the time of *Samson Agonistes*, had accepted a heavily Hebraized Christianity and that he set aside his usual Christian agenda in order to be faithful to Hebrew decorum in *Samson*. These two claims

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<sup>3</sup> The critical focus on Christian and classical interpretation is not as obvious in commentary on *Paradise Lost*, which includes many considerations of which rabbinic sources Milton may have read (Fletcher), how Milton thought of Midrash (Werman), and Milton's possible interaction with the writings of John Selden (Rosenblatt).

are unconvincing, especially considering that *Samson* was published in the same volume as *Paradise Regained*. The presence of Hebraic concepts and themes need not indicate a Hebraized Milton so much as a Milton who understood the historicity of his religion. There remains no reason to think that Milton would disregard his Christianity and adopt Hebraic sensibilities in *Samson*. Nevertheless, Shapiro's analysis is excellent; that is, the Hebraic themes she identifies are present in *Samson* and can be profitably applied to the problem of violence even as they lead to conclusions different from her own.

Perhaps the most developed of the rabbinic readings of *Samson Agonistes*, however, is the epilogue of Jeffrey Shoulson's *Milton and the Rabbis* (2001). Shoulson attempts to explicate *Samson* by considering the differences in tenor between the Miltonic and rabbinic interpretations of the Samson story. He concludes that Milton and the rabbis both reveal a deep ambivalence about the character of Samson, reinforcing the uncertainty for which Shawcross argues in his book. For Shoulson, Milton and the rabbis demonstrate the knowledge that Samson transgressed the Law and a determination to struggle with ways Samson could be redeemed from his transgressions. Shoulson and his method of reading of the drama never answer the question of whether the reader should be at peace regarding Samson's final act (261).



### **Historical Justification for Milton's Hebraism**

Comparing *Samson Agonistes* to rabbinic readings of the Samson story requires the assumption not only that Milton had access to rabbinic sources, but also that he was in dialogue with rabbinic sources. Much of the work needed to justify this assumption has been accomplished by the scholarship of Fletcher, Werman, Shapiro, and Shoulson. Starting “from Milton and not from the rabbis themselves” (8), Fletcher traces the rabbinic sources Milton actually cites, as well as making conclusions based on similarities between rabbinic writings and Milton’s poetry.

Six and a half decades later, Werman demonstrated how Fletcher’s methodology earned the skepticism of later critics (4-5). She does, however, contend that “midrashic ideas exist on almost every page, from the beginning to the end of [*Paradise Lost*]” (7). She grounds her claims to legitimacy on the fact that Milton’s England saw Latin translations of biblical interpretations based on “Jewish laws, customs, and legends extracted from the Mishnah, the Talmud, and midrashic collections” (29). These translations were useful to Protestants, she argues, because of the interpretive vacuum left by the Reformation’s “rejection of Catholic tradition and authority” (30). These works included the Buxtorf Bible and several other works using “the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, Rashi, the Tosafot, and Maimonides” (30). Ultimately, Werman argues that Milton demonstrates “superficial understanding of the rabbinic material” because he worked only with “secondary works in translations” instead of with the original rabbinic texts (40).

Shoulson picks up Werman’s thread, but he seeks to blur the lines between those sources considered Hebraic and those considered Christian or Hellenic. He suggests that even Jewish thought may have come to Milton through the medium of Christian or Hellenic secondary sources (4). His final argument is that Milton and the rabbis stood at similar historical periods

and thus wrote similar mythological interpretations to Scripture that sound alike because of their similar concerns: “the rabbis’ radical reformulation of post-biblical Judaism finds its own uncanny recapitulation in Milton’s innovative refashioning of post-Reformation Christianity” (5).

Despite Fletcher’s problematic methodology and whatever their immediate source, the presence of Hebrew concepts in *Samsons Agonistes* does give a Hebraic feel to the drama and does indicate that those concepts inform Milton’s opinion on Samson’s character. Regardless of how Milton came across the concepts, his drama is in dialogue with them. Even if Milton were exposed to rabbinic thought through Christian commentators, considering the rabbinic concepts directly will demonstrate how *Samson* is influenced by the distortions of the rabbis (if there are any distortions) that informs Milton’s thought.

Shapiro also makes a historical argument, pointing to the Protestant tendency to turn to Jewish literature and concepts. Like Werman and Shoulson, she points to Latin translations of Jewish works that would have been available to Milton, and she lists many instances of Judaic influence upon reformed thought and writings. She begins with Zwingli, whose “commentaries on Exodus reveal his familiarity with Rabbinical exegesis,” who, “like Milton,” “refers to the exegete Kimchi by name,” and whose “theories of proper government” directly correlate to borrowed Jewish ideas (36). Shapiro quotes a passage from “Heinrich Bullinger, one of Zwingli’s disciples,” who cites Zwingli’s familiarity with Greek and Hebrew pronunciation and how various biblical passages “had been treated by the old writers, what the Jewish commentators had thought about it...” (qtd. 37). She also mentions Oswal Glait, who used rabbinic writings to justify his “Sabbatarian and antitrinitarian” views (37). The greatest example of the Hebraization of Christianity Shapiro considers to be William Ames’s text *The Marrow of*

*Theology*, the covenantal ideas of which “inspired the Puritans to analogize themselves to Israel” (38). Ames defines sin as “a refusal of man to subject his will to G-d’s will, thus a refusal of man to be ‘the servant of God’ (*Eved Ha-Shem*),” and Milton refers to Ames in *Tetrachordon* (40).

The number of scholars who have noticed Milton’s use of Jewish sources should lead to confidence in applying rabbinic ideas to Milton’s most Hebraic work, *Samson*. Nevertheless, the historical argument is not as satisfying as Shapiro’s analysis of the Hebraic concepts and allusions that appear in *Samson*. Shapiro contends that the closet drama is “a wholly traditional Hebraic drama—Hebraic in decorum, concepts, language, and allusions” (74). Her claim that *Samson* reveals a completely Hebraic Milton fails to consider the fact that the drama was published along with *Paradise Regained*. Nevertheless, the drama does, indeed, conform to its Hebrew setting. The characters speak in Hebrew terms and make appropriately Hebrew allusions. Likewise, the concepts Shapiro identifies in the drama as Hebraic are certainly embedded into the work, and their presence reinforces the possibility of rabbinic influence upon Milton already brought out by the historical arguments above. Although written in a Christian milieu, *Samson* gives justice to the context of its source text, as well.

### Hebraic Themes and Allusions

The most convincing of the points Shapiro makes about Milton's Hebraism is that Milton considered England *Eved Ha-Shem*, the servant of God. She quotes an early reader of Milton, Sir Richard Jebb: "Milton habitually thought of the English People as holding the same place under the New Covenant which the Hebrews had held under the Old Covenant" (41). She further demonstrates the veracity of this claim by quoting *Aereopagitica*: "Why else was this Nation chos'n before any other, that out of her as out of *Sion* should be proclam'd and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation to all Europ" (41). Milton imagines a covenantal relationship both between England and God and between the English people and the English king (42). Milton may consider himself free to disagree with rabbinic sources, but his adoption of their concepts suggests that he also sees value in some of their fundamental assumptions.

That Milton considers England chosen to "[sound] forth the first tidings and trumpet of Reformation" hearkens to the Abrahamic Covenant, in which one of the blessings God promises Abraham is to bless all the "families of the earth" through Abraham's line (Gen. 12:3). Just as God chose to send the Law and the Messiah into the world through Israel, so he also chose to send true Christianity into the world through England. This identification of England with Israel also explains how Milton could consider himself a "selected [herald] of peace, and [dispenser] of treasures inestimable" (qtd. Shapiro 41). If England were analogous to Israel, then Milton was analogous to the prophets of Israel, charged with a special mission to proclaim God's message to the chosen nation, and thence to the nations of the earth.

Furthermore, Milton could have identified himself or his anti-tyranny political party with Samson. Just as Samson was an elect defender of a chosen nation, so Milton and his ilk were elected to lead God's chosen nation into freedom from tyranny and into a theocracy. This point,

of course, is hardly novel; it has been noted many times before.<sup>4</sup> More relevant is how this idea relates to the discussion of Samson's violence. Samson is elected by God to deliver God's election through violence. As a defender of regicide, Milton would not condemn violent deliverance from oppression. Rather, he portrays the regicide as a divine decree carried out by English servants of God (*Defense* 305). And if England is the new elected *Eved Ha-Shem*, then violence can be necessary, even holy.

The covenant is the central Jewish concept off of which all other self-identifying concepts build (Shapiro 76). Because of God's covenant with Israel, Israel receives the Law and becomes the national servant of God, blessed because of their service with freedom from moral and literal slavery. As a corollary, failing to live up to the covenant leaves Israel "impotent and easily a prey to enthrallment by other nations" (88). Shapiro notes that "Milton makes this same point" in *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana* (88, n. 28). Drawing on that concept leaves Milton ready to accept the implications of applying the concept to England and himself.

Violence Milton cannot categorically deny, for sometimes violence is the righteous anger of God. Indeed, Milton does not categorically denounce violence. For example, Christ in *Paradise Lost* not only sacrifices himself for the fallen humans, but also goes to war against the fallen angels (Herron).

Another of Shapiro's important concepts is that of the judge. Shapiro painstakingly distinguishes between "judges in the sense of *judicare*" and "judges in the sense of *vindicare*" (98). Shapiro's distinction between judges who pronounce sentences (*judicare*) and those who function as deliverers of their people (*vindicare*) holds strong throughout her argument and throughout the Written and Oral Torah. Originally, Shapiro summarizes, judges were only used

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<sup>4</sup> Serjeantson lists Christopher Hill (1984), Sharon Achinstein (1997), David Lowenstein (1997), Janel Mueller (2002), and John Coffey (2003) (613-14, n. 2).

to help Moses decide legal matters (98; Shapiro cites Ex. 18:26 and Deut. 1:15-6). She then gathers four passages from the Pentateuch that describe the requirements of judges. These requirements demand that judges be righteous: “fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness” (Ex. 18:21-2); “Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause” (Ex. 23:6); “hear the small as well as the great; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man” (Deut. 1:17); “Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift” (Deut. 16:18-9).<sup>5</sup> These are the requirements of the judges in the sense of *judicare*; their function is to discern right from wrong and the appropriate punishment. Shapiro also references excerpts from the Sanhedrin tractate of the Talmud, a tractate completely devoted to the legal workings of Israel. This tractate stipulates that those appointed judges should be whole and wise: “men of stature, wisdom, good appearance, mature age, with a knowledge of sorcery, and who are conversant with all seventy languages of mankind” (qtd. 99).

Finally, Shapiro considers Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*. Shapiro quotes a passage in which Rambam requires a judge of the people to always be conscious of his great responsibility: “At all times a judge should think of himself as if a sword were suspended over his head and Gehenna gaping under him. He should know...Who will call him to account if he deviate from the line of truth” (qtd. 101). Once again, this type of judge is one who adjudicates, not one who delivers. As a legal judge, he must be righteous and uphold the law so that he remains qualified to judge his people.

In the book of Judges, however, the leaders of the people were not always legal judges. Some were, such as Deborah, to whom “the children of Israel came up...for judgment” (Judges 4:5). Most, however, were avenging judges tasked with delivering the people from the foreigners to whom God had subjected them to punish them. Thus, God used judges such as Othniel, Ehud,

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<sup>5</sup> These verses are quoted in Shapiro 98-9.

Shamgar, and Gideon to achieve purely military victories against their enemies and free the Israelites from slavery. Very little is said about the characters of these men. Some merit only a one-sentence description. Shamgar, for instance: “And after him was Shamgar the son of Anath, which slew of the Philistines six hundred men with an ox goad: and he also delivered Israel” (3:31). The value of this judge is clearly not in his righteousness or his ability to render justice, but in his ability to kill Philistines and effect Israel’s freedom.

As Shapiro points out, the moral characters of these judges (except legal judges like Deborah) is irrelevant to their primary function. God raises them up to deliver Israel from the physical violence of foreign powers, so they are chosen to exert physical force against their enemies. What really matters, the Judges text implies, is the masses of the people. It is when “the children of Israel again d[o] evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judges 4:1) that God punishes them. Likewise, when they “cr[y] out unto the LORD” (4:3), God relents from his punishment and restores them to his favor. The person that God uses to effect this salvation does not matter. If anything, the character of a judge reflects the character of the nation rather than the nature of his vocation. Thus, one modern rabbi says, “There was a time when the nation did not merit a leader as great as these historic figures, so Jephthah became their judge; or a time when they did not deserve to conquer their enemies, so God gave them Samson, whose individual exploits kept the brutal Philistines at bay” (Scherman 117). That is, the worthiness of the instrument of salvation is unimportant; the key concept is that the nation as a whole must repent and deserve salvation before it receives salvation.

Even Moses, the greatest deliverer of Israel, who acted as both legal and delivering judge, was not devoid of all sin. In the midst of the wilderness, wandering in circles because their faith was not great enough to allow them to enter the Promised Land, the people come close to

rebelling against Moses, demanding that he provide water for them. So bitter do they feel that they question why Moses delivered them from Egypt. Angry at their presumption in questioning the great salvation moment of Jewish history, Moses calls out to God to provide water for them. God tells Moses, “speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth its water” (Num. 20:8). Carried away by his bitterness, Moses stands before the people, chides them, and strikes the rock with his staff. God provides the people water from the rock, but for striking the rock instead of only speaking to it, God issues this punishment to Moses and Aaron: “Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them” (20:12).

Rashi comments that Moses and Aaron are punished here “because of the sanctification of the Name” (*Complete Num.* 20:12). If Moses’ faith had lapsed in private, so that no one else had seen the infraction, God might have forgiven him. Because his sin elevated Moses instead of God in the eyes of the people, however, God’s glory was at stake, and Moses had to be punished. Rashi agrees with Aggadah (folkloric stories used to interpret biblical texts) that if Moses and Aaron had followed God’s command properly, the Israelites would have said to themselves, “If this rock, which neither speaks nor hears, and does not require sustenance, fulfills the word of the Omnipresent, how much more should we!”

The essential question that determines Moses’ culpability is the question of *Chillul Ha-Shem*, or desecration of the name of God. Shapiro ties this concept to that of *Eved Ha-Shem* by saying, “Because Israel is the servant of God, his behavior must bring glory to God” (120). That Moses not only fails to give God glory but even threatens to dishonor God before the people means that he betrays his very purpose of being. His betrayal does not, however, disqualify him from God’s service. The concern for God’s glory and the question of whether *Chillul Ha-Shem*



disqualifies one from serving God or from receiving a reward becomes important in explaining the temple holocaust in *Samson Agonistes*.

It is clear that Moses' infidelity to God did not compromise his ability to provide water for the people. Nor was he immediately deposed from his position of leadership. Even more telling, Rashi decides that Moses' indiscretion would have been forgiven if it had happened in private (*Complete Num.* 20:12). Like the adjudicating judges after him, Moses is chosen by God to accomplish a specific task (in this case, leading the Israelites to Palestine and giving them the Law). His moral character, although usually exemplary, is irrelevant to his task. He incurs punishment upon himself when he compromises God's glory in front of the Israelites, but even this egregious sin does not mean God will cease to use him to lead the people.

This principle is also applicable to Samson, as rabbinic commentary shows. Samson may marry Gentiles, he may visit a harlot, and he may even betray his Nazirite vows, but God will still accomplish through him the salvation the angel promised to his parents. It is not Samson's moral integrity that matters; God still imbues him with strength. What makes Samson useful is simply the fact that God uses him.

Just as God's favor is dependent upon the Israelites' keeping their obligations under the covenant, so each individual Israelite must remain faithful to the covenant in order to be blessed. If an Israelite lapses into sin, he must either atone for it, as specified in the books of the Law, or be punished for it. Samson, then, breaks his part of the covenant when he sleeps with a harlot and when he betrays his vows to Dalila.<sup>6</sup> Because he has broken the covenant, he can in turn expect God to withdraw favor from him. The very fact that Samson labors blindly at a foreign mill is a direct result of his free will to sin.

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<sup>6</sup> Under the covenant, marriage to a Gentile is one of the "forbidden unions" (Citron) that merits flogging (Maimonides 90).

Samson lives in covenant with God just as the rest of his people do, but he lives in covenant with God additionally as a Nazirite. Under this covenant, Samson's strength, as the reader discovers in Judges 16, is gifted to him through his hair, the outward symbol of his status of Nazirite. As a Nazirite, he cannot drink wine, cut his hair, or become ritually unclean. Of course, he becomes ritually unclean by coming into contact with corpses in his slaughtering binges and when he kills 1,000 Philistines with a dead donkey's jawbone. However, his uncleanness is either punished by having to drink from the spring from the jawbone, as Rashi explains, or is permissible for Samson's unique type of Nazirite vows. The Mishnah explains the "Nazir in the status of Samson" as one who, "[If] he is made unclean, he does not bring an offering on account of uncleanness" (Neusner 431).

Like any other biblical character, Samson suffers consequences for his sin because he has broken his covenant with God. One of those consequences is not, however, that God ceases to accomplish his will through Samson. Denouncing Samson's final action because of his immorality shows a misunderstanding of the concept of the delivering judge and of God's election and prophecy as Milton understood those phenomena (Milton's understanding of these processes is discussed below).

## Rabbinic Interpretation of Samson

Much critical attention has gone to Samson's violent life. John Carey, in particular, has demonstrated the modern discomfort some critics experience in reaction to Samson's aggression. Here, however, the regenerationists have a point. They cite *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and Milton's defense of England's regicide to prove that Milton had no aversion to violence in principle. Rather, in some situations, Milton considers violence the only righteous choice of action (*Defense* 305). Similarly, the rabbis cannot condemn violence categorically; rather, they take pains to show that violence in the Bible is legitimate and just; Shoulson uses the phrase "talionic justice" (248 ff).

Violence is ubiquitous in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first recorded physical death is directly enacted by God.<sup>7</sup> After that death, violence against humans is portrayed negatively until God kills all humans except Noah and his family (Gen. 6-8). Later, God asks Abraham to kill his son Isaac to prove his faithfulness, although God does not allow Abraham to carry this violence out (Gen. 22). In Moses' time, human violence becomes more acceptable,<sup>8</sup> and the Mosaic Law includes many sins that are punishable by death.<sup>9</sup> God delivers Israel with the sword many times before finally becoming exasperated and punishing the Israelites by allowing foreign kings to defeat and exile them.

All these instances of violence are portrayed positively by the biblical authors, and the rabbis interpret the violence through the talionic system of justice that Shoulson notices. The

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<sup>7</sup> He kills animals to clothe Adam and Eve after the Fall (Gen. 3:21).

<sup>8</sup> Because the Israelites make and worship a golden calf while Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments, Moses orders the calf-worshippers to be killed (Ex. 32:26-28). When God leads the Israelites once more into the Promised Land, he orders them to destroy all the Canaanites (Judges 1). The stories of the judges include shocking slaughters, and in 1 Sam. 15, Samuel reprimands King Saul for not killing the king and the livestock of the Amalekites along with the rest of the population. Two books later, after winning a victory for God against Baal, Elijah orders the prophets of Baal to be slaughtered (1 Kings 18:40).

<sup>9</sup> Examples include worshipping Molech, all sorts of sexual sins, witchcraft, blasphemy, and murder (Lev. 20-24). Failing to keep the Sabbath incurs death directly from God (Lev. 23:30).

strongest example is Rashi's commentary on 1 Sam. 15, in which Saul fails to kill all the Amalekites. Rashi's comments heighten the poetic justice of the story and illuminate the rabbinic understanding of the talionic justice at work when God uses violence. The first verse, which in English translation contains the neutral words of Samuel, "and now hearken to the words of the voice of the Lord," becomes in Rashi's interpretation, "Once, you acted foolishly. Now, take heed" (*Complete* 1 Sam. 15:1). This rephrasing sets the stage for a complex interpretation based on a concept of reciprocal justice and on an assumption that God and the Hebrew Scriptures operate in systems of parallelism. That is, the rest of Rashi's commentary on this story will highlight the reciprocity the rabbis see in the Bible's violence and reveal the poetic technique of parallelism that operates in the rabbinic scheme of interpretation.

Rashi casts this story as a chance for Saul to redeem himself from previous transgressions. In Rashi's imagining of the story, Samuel begins each part of his charge to Saul with an indication of the tense in which he speaks (i.e., "Once" and "now"). He then describes Saul's past actions in terms of the king's obedience—or lack thereof—to God's commands. Thus, "you acted foolishly" is structurally parallel to the command to do the opposite, "take heed" and is, therefore, parallel in importance. Saul's previous indiscretions disqualified him from God's favor, but his current charge carries the same weight and can overturn God's displeasure.

The parallelism of Samuel's words reflects the parallelism of the situations in which Saul finds himself. In the previous chapter, Saul had dismissed the people of Israel from punishment and almost slain his own son, Jonathan. In this chapter, he will slaughter most of the Amalekites, but spare the king, who, like Jonathan, has royal blood. In the same way, the judgment God means to deal to the Amalekites is parallel to the hostility they exhibited against Israel. Rashi

explains that Saul cut the king of the Amalekites into pieces because that king had castrated Israelites (*Complete* 1 Sam. 15:33).

Not only does Agog receive what he, personally, deserves, but the Amalekites as a whole deserve their fate. Rashi explains the divine order to kill all the livestock by saying that the Amalekites “were sorcerers, and they would change themselves to resemble animals” (15:3). To explain verse five, in which Saul defeats the Amalekites in a valley, Rashi references Deut. 21:4. In this passage, the law commands that, if a man is murdered and no one knows who murdered him, the elders of the closest city kill a heifer in a valley. Thus, Rashi can reason, “if for the sake of one soul, the Torah said, ‘decapitate a calf in the valley’ (Deut. 21), how much more for the sake of all these souls” (15:5). The many souls to which Rashi refers are probably those killed in Israel’s various wars with Amalek. In Exodus 17:14, God swears to “utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven” because the Amalekites had attacked the Israelites in the wilderness.

In verse six, Saul releases the Kennites so that he will not slaughter them along with the Amalekites. According to Rashi, Saul releases the Kennites because they are descendants of Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, who had fed “all the elders of Israel” in Ex. 18:12 (*Complete* 1 Sam. 15:6). Again, God’s servant Saul treats the Kennites as they deserve according to God’s blessing to Abraham: “and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee” (Gen. 12:3). This promise demonstrates again the structural and grammatical parallelism that underlies Hebrew poetry and prose and informs the reciprocal imagination of the commentators.

Instead of slaughtering *all* of the Amalekites, however, Saul spares their king and the best of their livestock. Samuel then comes to confront Saul, who tries to excuse himself by saying he meant to kill Agog in a holy place and to sacrifice the livestock to God. Samuel, however,

informs the king that “to obey is better than a peace-offering; to hearken (is better) than the fat of rams” (*Complete* 1 Sam. 15:22). Even more harshly, Samuel then says, “rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim. Since you rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you from being a king” (15:23). Here again, emphasis is on the justice of the fitting punishment. Saul rejects God, so God rejects Saul. Rashi comments that this verse means that the punishment for stubbornness is the same as the punishment for idolatry and teraphim (15:23). Since the Old Testament documents many cases of God’s killing Israelites for idolatry, it is reasonable to assume that Saul’s tragic, violent death (1 Sam. 31:4) is a result of his disobedience here and elsewhere. Saul’s stubbornness is both his obvious refusal to carry out the entirety of God’s will and, as Rashi comments, “adding” to the commands of God (15:23). Again, there is justice in God’s judgments; because Saul added a sacrifice God did not command, God will add a doom to the plan he originally designed for Saul. Fittingly, God will also add David to the throne of Israel—another punishment for Saul, whose line will no longer be royal.

All this is to say that Rashi not only accepts the violence in 1 Samuel, but takes great interpretive pains to prove why it is justified. The scene as told by the biblical writer already contains narrative parallels (e.g., between Saul’s previous life and his present chance for redemption) and parallels in speech (e.g., Samuel’s injunction to Saul), but Rashi contributes to this existing parallelism in order to highlight the talionic justice of the text. His drive to justify Saul’s violence indicates the potential problem that violence exhibits for the rabbi. While he does not categorically denounce violence, his conception of God and of the deity’s justice requires him to demonstrate that the Amalekites deserved their fate. Rashi’s commentary shows that the

rabbis can justify violence if that violence is directed at violent people—the violence must be talionic and must fit the rabbinic emphasis on reciprocity.

The narratives of the judges are no different. The Hebrew conquest of Canaan is another of the divine commands that often offends modern readers. God had promised the Israelites many times in the books preceding Joshua that he would expel the people who lived in Canaan so that the Israelites could live there. Thus, when the Israelites started colonizing the land, they were required to drive their predecessors out fully and not allow any of the other peoples to remain. Judges 1:27 reads in Rashi's text,<sup>10</sup> “And Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-Shean and its towns, Taanach and its towns, the inhabitants of Dor and its towns, the inhabitants of Yibleam and its towns, the inhabitants of Megiddo and its towns; and the Canaanites wanted to remain in this land” (Rosenburg). Rashi's commentary on this verse reads, “The Scripture tells of their shame; they began to betray the Holy One, blessed be He, Who commanded them, (Num. 33:52) ‘You shall drive all the inhabitants of the land etc.’” (10).

To Rashi, then, Israel's failure to drive out all the Canaanites is not just regrettable; it is a betrayal of God. In the term Shapiro uses, they have committed *Chillul Ha-Shem*, the desecration of God's name. The rabbinic tradition of interpreting the failures of the Israelites to drive out their predecessors, recorded in Judges 1, is so strongly negative that later commentators on the book of Judges claim that the events of this chapter lead to the eventual destruction of the first Temple because of idolatry (Scherman 122). The idea here is that the Canaanites who remained in the Holy Land continued to worship their idols, and the omnipresence of that idolatry tempted the Israelites, so that they began worshipping other gods and incurred God's wrath upon themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> The Masoretic

The stories of Judges chronicle Israel's recurrent sin of idolatry. In the cycle of the book, Israel is blessed by God, then falls away to idols, then repents and is delivered by a God-sanctioned judge. Again and again, God uses violence to punish the Hebrews and violence to deliver them. Violence in itself, even genocide, is thus not portrayed as sinful; rather, humans often enact violence as servants of God. Hence, Gideon's followers can yell their battle cry, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon" (Judges 7:20), indicating that the victory "will be thanks to God's miraculous intervention, and the agent of the victory will be Gideon (*Targum*)" (Scherman 163, *sic*). In all these cases, the narrative gives the reader, and later rabbis, no reason to think the violence is sinful, but every reason to think that it is divinely inspired.

Thus, in the case of Samson, the simple presence of violence should not lead readers to doubt the judge's actions. The Judges narrative makes no attempt to hide Samson's faults, but neither does it condemn his violence or his final action. What concerns the rabbis, and what they take pains to explain, is Samson's Philistine wives. Radak interprets Samson's marriage in Judges 14 by saying, "It is unthinkable that the judge and savior of the Jewish people would transgress a Biblical prohibition"; thus, he decides that Samson converts his wives before marrying them (Scherman 201). Interestingly, Radak reads Delilah as Samson's wife, even though the biblical account gives no indication that the judge married Delilah. It is notable that Radak assumes that Samson's motivation for marrying a Philistine woman is to deliver the people—a safe canonical assumption given verse four: "it was of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines." Despite Samson's faults, Radak is at pains to excuse him. In chapter sixteen, for example, Samson "went in unto" a harlot (16:1). Again, Radak attempts to ameliorate Samson's apparent fault by saying that Samson converted the harlot to Judaism before living with her (Scherman 209). Radak indicates his discomfort with Samson's licentious



sexuality by focusing so much interpretive attention upon it. He cannot accept that God would dispense with the Written or Oral Torah for Samson—and neither can Milton, as many critics of *Samson Agonistes* have pointed out.

On the other hand, not all of the major rabbis felt it necessary to excuse Samson. In the case of the harlot, Rashi and “the Sages” do not excuse Samson of his sin (Scherman 209). Indeed, the rabbinical ambivalence runs deep. In chapter fifteen, Samson kills 1,000 Philistines with a jawbone, becomes thirsty, and asks God for water. God then provides a spring of water from the jawbone (Judges 15:15-9). Referencing Rashi and the Talmud, two modern rabbis gloss this episode as poetic justice: just as Samson had performed God’s work of deliverance through the unclean method of marrying a Gentile, so now God relieves Samson’s thirst with an unclean jawbone (Rosenburg 126). Here, Rashi and the rabbis whose glosses make up the Talmud show their recognition of Samson as a flawed judge. However, the flaw they emphasize is not Samson’s violence, which serves God’s purposes, but his lust.

Samson’s blinding and slavery, of course, are God’s justice once more at work. The Talmud teaches that God, using the Philistines to punish Samson for his infidelity, allows the Philistines to blind Samson because the judge’s sin lay in his eyes; he lusted after Gentile women, so his eyes were taken from him (Scherman 213). Similarly, the Philistines took him to Gaza to work as a slave, because that was “the location of his first corruption” (Rosenburg 133). Just as he punishes Israel as a whole in the earlier chapters of Judges, so now God punishes Samson in a manner parallel to the judge’s sin. The Philistines proceed to gloat over Samson, degrading him as he had degraded them. They force him to “make us sport” (Judges 16:5) to heighten their sense of just retribution upon this rebel.

Finally, having had enough of his reversal of blessing, Samson calls upon God for one last miracle of strength so that he can avenge himself. He prays for the ability to “be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes” (Judges 16:28). In Scherman’s translation of Rashi, this request is rendered, “I will exact vengeance from the Philistines for one of my two eyes” (Scherman, Judges 16:28). Rashi comments that Samson is implying that one of his eyes would be avenged by the deaths of the Philistines, while “the merit of his other eye should be reserved for his reward in the World to Come” (Scherman 214). Rashi also notes that Samson asks God to remember him, and the rabbi takes this request to mean that Samson wants God to remember that he never abused his position as judge of Israel (Rosenburg 135-6). Thus, Rashi reads Samson as justified at the end of his life. The judge prays for a miracle and is granted that miracle, and despite all his faults, he will nevertheless be accepted into “the World to Come.” Similarly, Ralbag comments that Samson “grieved at the desecration of God’s Name,” and because he knew his sin had made him unworthy to continue living, he asked for the mercy of being able to die defending God’s name (Scherman 214). Ralbag also, then, sees Samson’s last act in a positive light.

Problematically for regenerationists, the Judges redactor never states that God’s spirit empowers Samson during the judge’s last destruction. This absence becomes an important point in criticism of *Samson Agonistes*. However, those Rashi calls “The commentators” point out that the spirit of God is not explicitly stated to have empowered Samson at any point in chapter sixteen. The author uses this stylistic choice, the commentators say, as a storytelling technique used to show that God’s favor is no longer with Samson (Scherman 209). Nevertheless, there seems to be no doubt that Samson’s strength still has its source in God. After all, if Samson were to be empowered by some other source, the narrative would take on a meaning different enough

for the redactor to mention the entrance of some other spirit. Rather, the point of not referring to God's spirit is to participate in the distance Samson creates for himself from the source of his strength. Beginning with his indiscretion in Gaza, he falls further and further away from God's favor and toward his ultimate debasing at the hands of the Philistines. Although the reader is expected to understand that Samson's superhuman feats of strength are still made possible by God, the Judges author excludes God's name from the disgraceful acts of the chapter until Samson calls on that name at the very end.

All these considerations, from an initial reading of the Judges account of Samson to the Jewish interpretive tradition on that account, yield a mostly positive view of Samson. Some commentators explain away all of Samson's sexual sins, but others simply accept the judge's sins. Thus, in Rashi's view, Samson is flawed, but he also fulfills his function as avenging judge and partial savior of Israel. The rabbis remove the troublesome possibilities for Samson's violence by emphasizing the parallel, fitting nature of his retribution; they are able to make these comments because they accept that God uses violence to punish Israel and Israel's persecutors. The Judges narrative does not explicitly state God's presence in chapter sixteen, but the ancient and medieval commentators see this absence as a narrative technique rather than an indication of a different source of Samson's strength.

### Similarities and Differences in Milton's Telling

Milton's version of the Samson story features several differences from the rabbinic interpretation. A comparison highlighting these differences between the rabbinic version of the story and Milton's supports the negative critical camp. Despite the significant differences Milton incorporates into his telling of the Samson story, he also uses some of the Jewish concepts Shapiro points out and some of the concerns of the rabbis, and the Hebraic concerns the characters share support a more positive critical view of Samson.

#### *Wittreich's Conception of History*

The foremost of the scholars in the negative camp is Joseph Wittreich, whose two books on *Samson Agonistes* present a sophisticated understanding of the drama in relation to its biblical source. Wittreich sees Samson in the light of his conception of the general arc of the Judges narrative, which, he claims, Milton shared (*Interpreting Samson Agonistes* 109). Adam and Eve, Wittreich argues, fall only to rise the higher. Samson, however, only continues to fall lower until, at last, he brings final destruction upon himself, creating in the reader a "despairing vision of history" (*Interpreting* 109) and a sense that England, like Israel, is falling ever downward with no hope of return. Wittreich appeals to "the last chapters of Judges," claiming that the peace Manoa and the Chorus hope Samson's sacrifice will bring "is but a delusion" (111). Thus, Wittreich's Samson is a sinful, prideful, self-deluded strongman who puts too much trust in his own might and not enough in the reciprocal covenant of God. Like Israel as a whole, this Samson finds the temptations before him too great to endure, so he incurs the wrath of his ancestors' god.

Wittreich's methodology is interesting. He reads Milton's drama the way Robert Alter in *Art of Biblical Narrative* reads the book of Judges. In both hermeneutics, he says, emphasis is created by "insistent repetition" (*Interpreting* 63). What is repeated, however, Wittreich does not find to Samson's credit. The most frequently repeated events from Samson's life are "the annunciation of Samson's birth, his supposed inspiration, his role as a deliverer, his first marriage, his repeated slayings of others" (63-64). In Wittreich's paradigm, these repeated episodes contribute to the tragic trajectory of the drama. Just as the Abrahamic Covenant and the exodus from Egypt create expectations for Israel that the nation does not keep, so the annunciation of Samson's birth creates expectations for Samson that he does not keep. Wittreich doubts Samson's inspiration, points out that the judge does not free Israel from the Philistines, subscribes to Manoa's view that Samson's first marriage was no less sinful than his second, and sees all of Samson's violent outbreaks as inordinate and evil.

#### *Doubt over Samson's Inspiration*

One of the great questions that has affected whether critics read Samson positively or negatively is whether the divine inspiration he claims at the end of the drama is, in fact, divine. Wittreich sees Milton as reading the Judges narrative and using emphasis or de-emphasis to indicate importance. Thus, the fact that the word *spirit* occurs only three times in the drama (1238, 1435, 1675), and only once in reference to God's spirit (1435), casts doubt upon whether Samson is actually moved by God to do his deeds ("*Samson Agonistes*" 114). Thus, Wittreich's version of Milton's thesis regarding Samson is that "Samson *thinks* he is moved by God to do this or that" (141).

Wittreich applies this interpretation to the Judges narrative, as well. He notes that the narrator says nothing of Samson's divine inspiration after the jawbone incident (142). Of course, the rabbis had also noted this fact and not thought that it necessitated a negative reading of Samson's death (Scherman 209). Wittreich bolsters his argument, however, by quoting Samson's final words before pulling the temple down: "Now *of my own accord*... / I mean to shew you of my strength" (qtd. 143).

Samson places upon himself a serious accusation, indeed. The holocaust is, after all, the event that salvages Samson's reputation in the eyes of the positive interpreters. Phillip Donnelly, for example, argues for Samson's genuine repentance from his sin based on the fact that he acts on that repentance, demonstrating his sincerity through his willingness to die for the glory of God (212). Shapiro also makes this argument: "What is especially Hebraic" about the return of God's spirit to Samson at the end of the drama is that the return depends on Samson's actions in proving his repentance through rejecting the temptations with which his various visitors afflict him (273). Certainly, however, this reading cannot exonerate Samson of the motive his own words betray. It also does not explain Samson's previous evident concern for his own pride, discussed below.

Other critics also dispense too quickly with Wittreich's objections. For example, Serjeantson argues that scholars should interpret *Samson Agonistes* in the light of Reformation commentary on the book of Judges. However, this argument overlooks Wittreich's specific instances of deconstruction. Milton was, in any case, the minority political and theological opinion at the point in his life at which he penned *Samson*, so limiting one's reading of Milton to what others around him thought is dangerous. Serjeantson's attention to Reformation commentary also ignores the methodology on which Wittreich's argument is built: the trajectory

of thought that results from the various emphases Milton adds to or detracts from his source. In short, Serjeantson's historical approach to *Samson* fails to address the issues pointed out by Wittreich's literary approach.

Regina Schwartz, in the same collection as Serjeantson, suggests that Milton may delete Samson's final prayer in order to avoid the indication of revenge implicit in the prayer recorded in Judges (633, n. 1). However, Schwartz does not account for the very explicit statement of Samson's "own accord" that Milton intentionally adds to the judge's final prayer. Later, Schwartz argues that the drama demonstrates Samson's ability to yet again be a national hero, led by God, but only after he has conquered the temptations of idols (645). This argument is unsatisfactory, however, because Samson never does fully conquer the idol of pride. Also, Schwartz reads the drama as a warning that "Our reason is faulty, but the motions of the inner spirit are to be trusted" (647). While Milton may have agreed that reason can be faulty, it would take significant explanation to justify the claim that Milton holds "the motions of the inner spirit" above the trustworthiness of the mind, for the primacy of right reason has been an axiom among Milton scholars for a long time. In fact, Schwartz herself uses the importance of right reason to indict Eve's drunkenness in *Paradise Lost* (646).

Clay Daniel contends that the parallel structures of the tales of Samson's two marriages demonstrate he "never reconciles with God" (73). He outlines four steps each of Samson's marriages have in common:

- (1) Samson violates religious law that prohibits intermarriage, as well as the Fifth Commandment, to sate his lust and implement a stratagem that he hopes will culminate in his violation of the Sixth Commandment; (2) the Philistine bride betrays her husband to his Philistine enemies by revealing to them one of his

secrets...; (3) Samson casts off his faithless mate; and (4) Samson, loudly claiming divine inspiration, revenges his betrayal by slaughtering Philistines. (73)

Samson's actions have these results because, Daniel asserts, violence is the "inseparable, fatal twin of lust" in the Miltonic canon (72-73). Since these are Samson's motivations, Daniel reasons that Milton could not have supported the dispensation theory to excuse Samson. Daniel claims that "nowhere in Milton's poetry does God inspire his creatures to violate the laws of eternal providence" (74) because such inspiration would make God mutable, which Milton in *De Doctrina* argues he cannot be (qtd. 73). Not only would the unchangeable God have changed his mind, but he would also be leading a human into the bondage of sin and putting "a limitation" on Samson's free will (75). To Daniel, Samson's sins and violence are the product not of God's will or the prompting of God's spirit, but of Samson's own deviant lust. "From first to last," Daniel writes, "Samson quits himself like Samson, which is not a cause for the pious to celebrate" (73).

#### *Deletion of the Final Prayer*

Schwartz's focus on idols may be instructive, but her conclusion, that Milton trusts spiritual motions over reason, is anticipated by one of Wittreich's strongest points—that Milton deletes Samson's final prayer. Wittreich uses this deletion to argue that Samson's holocaust is the result of Samson's own emotions, not of God's prompting. In the words of Goodwin, Samson is as one of "a Reprobate Mind" who receives God's power but "neither glorifie[s] him nor g[ives] him thanks" (Wittreich, "*Samson Agonistes*," 107). Thus, reliance on "motions of the spirit" is as destructive to right reason as is drunkenness. Moreover, mass violence based on the motions of a spirit not of the true God discounts both the character of the enactor of that violence and the violent act itself—in this case, the temple holocaust.



The fact that Milton, in his account, chooses to deprive Samson of the prayer recorded in the biblical account begs for a critical pause in determining the source of Samson's strength. The conventional answer of a positive reading is to claim that Samson's strength comes from God. Thus, Samson's status as defender of Israel is reaffirmed by the return of his "heaven-gifted strength" (36) before the opening of the drama. Negative readers of *Samson*, however, are not convinced by this reading. Wittreich, for example, interprets Samson's self-justifications as "pernicious casuistry," thus "depraving the letter of the law with sophistical justifications" ("*Samson Agonistes*" 118). Wittreich does not see enough evidence of repentance in Samson's words or of approval in Milton's words to justify a regeneration theory.

In his second book on *Samson*, edited with Mark Kelley, Wittreich writes another chapter proposing a negative reading of Samson's character. In this second important negative argument, Wittreich reads the drama as "turned against itself" in order to present "a variety of perceptions of Samson" so that the story, used by so many of Milton's contemporaries to justify violence, "could be liberating" (98). Instead of presenting, like his contemporaries, a justification for violent oppression, Milton, Wittreich argues, inserts ambiguity into the drama so that the over-allegorized story could be free to support dissenting opinions.

Wittreich reads some lines in *Samson* as "inching toward a sympathetic portrait of *some* of the Philistines" (101). To make this point, he references lines 1466-68, in which Manoa relates his success in asking some of the Philistine lords, "More generous far and civil" (1466), for Samson's return. Again, Wittreich's comments lead to a serious problem for critics arguing for a regeneration reading. Manoa, and presumably the reader shares his view, appreciates the leniency of the Philistines who are ready to let Samson live the rest of his life in peace now that he has been neutralized. These lords present a foil to Samson's defining characteristic, his

unappeasable anger. Through Manoa's eyes, the audience sees the reason in the actions of the merciful Philistine lords and grows to resent the hate of the lords who, invoking Dagon's honor, refuse to let Samson go.

This interpretation may appeal to John Carey, whom Samson's violence causes discomfort; however, as David Wilson-Okamura has said, it falls into the same trap as Belial in *Paradise Lost*. In the council of demons, Belial hopes that, if the demons accept their punishment and act subdued, God will relent his wrath and let them out of Hell. The narrator of the epic, however, considers Belial's advice "ignoble ease and peaceful sloth, / Not peace" (227-28). Similarly, Manoa offers his son a chance to accept not peace but cheap ease (Wilson-Okamura).

In Wittreich's reading, Samson's refusal to accept his father's proposal of relief is an outcome of the violence that informs all his actions. He is violently dismissive of Dalila's request for forgiveness, just as he is violently retributive against himself. To Wittreich, Samson's harshness is a sign of hate—as opposed to the regenerationist view, which sees Samson's rejection of Dalila as a sign of repentance. In the negative paradigm, Samson refuses to forgive Dalila because he is too violently unwilling to exhibit forgiveness, even on himself. This attitude, presumably, is the same that allows Manoa to rejoice over the massacre of the Philistines [c.f. Carey's horror at Manoa's reaction (16)]. Thus, Wittreich reads Samson as a negative counterpart to Christ. Whereas Christ gives up his body without protest to make forgiveness the rule, Samson vindictively takes an eye for an eye—he matches "spite with spite" (111).

From the beginning to the end of both of his arguments, Wittreich sees no evidence that Samson's actions are divinely inspired. Harsher on Samson than are the rabbis or any of Milton's contemporaries, Wittreich questions all of Samson's claims to inspiration, not just his marriages (*Interpreting Samson Agonistes* 66). If Samson is wrong about the source of his "rousing

motions,” then he is using God’s name as an excuse to carry out personal vengeance. As Wittreich notes, Milton’s contemporary John Goodwin condemns this sort of abuse of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit: “Goodwin resists the notion of God as a spirit rushing upon and compelling people to actions requiring dispensation only because the actions are so horrific (like the temple catastrophe?) that people, fearful of taking responsibility for such actions, ascribe them to God” (“*Samson Agonistes*” 107).<sup>11</sup>

The bottom line for Wittreich is the notion that might “comes to Samson as a gift from God, but how that gift will be used—or abused—is determined by Samson himself” (115). Of course, the negative reading of the drama’s protagonist insists that Samson misuses this gift. Wittreich uses Milton’s prose to argue against the possibility of divine sanction of Samson’s final act of vengeance. Given Milton’s historic resistance to dispensation, Wittreich finds it unlikely that the poet would smile upon the excuses Samson uses to justify going to the temple of Dagon (120-22).

The trouble with Wittreich’s argument is that he does not consider Shapiro’s contention that Milton “had come to believe in the Hebraisms he wrote about in *Samson Agonistes*” (74). While it is equally unlikely that Milton dispensed with his own religion when he wrote *Samson*, Shapiro does have a point. She references another critic, saying *Samson* is “a wholly traditional Hebraic drama—Hebraic in decorum, concepts, language, and allusions” (74). Shapiro’s claim that *Samson* reveals a completely Hebraic Milton fails to consider the fact—which Wittreich emphasizes—that the drama was published along with *Paradise Regained*. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>11</sup> It is possible to argue that Samson’s greatest flaw is assuming that things will not change. Thus, once prompted to marry a Gentile for the sake of God’s cause, he assumes that his later impulses to cohabit with Gentile women are similarly excusable. In the same vein, he assumes that, once he has lost God’s favor, he can never again serve God or his nation, and this assumption leads him to the despair against which Manoa warns him (for example, he discounts the possibility of ever regaining sight in lines 590-93). It seems that scholarship shares Samson’s fallacy; Wittreich and other negative readers assume that, since Samson’s claims to previous divine inspiration are called into doubt, his claim to inspiration at the end of the drama must also be suspect. One is left wondering whether Samson learns before the critics do that his position in the eyes of God is subject to change.

drama does, indeed, conform to its Hebrew setting. The characters speak in Hebrew terms and (mostly) make allusions appropriate to their historical setting. Likewise, the concepts Shapiro identifies in the drama as Hebraic are certainly embedded into the work.

To be able to condemn Samson's holocaust, Wittreich has to read the drama in the same way that Robert Alter reads Judges: "Values are implicit, judgment is by inference" (*Interpreting Samson Agonistes* 108). This principle is certainly true of the Old Testament histories, and extending it to *Samson Agonistes* may be appropriate because of the work's genre. Nevertheless, the complete absence of direct condemnation of Samson's slaughter seems uncharacteristic of Milton. It is perfectly reasonable to suspect Milton of attempting to deconstruct the contemporary reading of Samson. However, one would expect the poet to let his opinion be heard at least once in the drama. Instead, no character condemns Samson's final act.

### *Chillul Ha-Shem*

A corollary to Israel's convenantal self-conception is the sin of desecrating the Holy Name. This sin is the greatest possible sin in the paradigm Shapiro and the rabbis put forth. In fact, it is a failure to live up to the prime end of human life: "the avoidance of *Chillul Ha-Shem* [desecration of God's Name] is the quintessence of man's obligation to God...in addition to giving God one's own love, one must make God beloved by others who do not know Him. Everything man does should be with the thought of accomplishing this" (Shapiro 121). This priority of glorifying God explains Rashi's commentary on Moses' indiscretion in striking the rock with his staff; the public setting of the sin allowed God's glory to come into question. In the same way, Samson's betrayal of his secret to Dalila desecrates God's name. Shapiro quotes from

Midrash: “When Israel fulfills the will of God, then the name of God is exalted in the world, and when Israel does not do the will of God, God’s Name is profaned in the world” (qtd. 121).

Because he did not do the will of God by keeping his secret, Samson profaned God’s name. This sin is made worse by Samson’s previous status as champion of God’s people. As the instrument of God to deliver the people of God, Samson’s symbolic function was to embody God’s power over the Philistines and their god. When Samson loses his strength, therefore, he allows the Philistines to exalt their god above Israel’s God. The Samson of the drama recognizes this consequence of his actions:

Father, I do acknowledge and confess  
 That I this honour, I this pomp have brought  
 To Dagon, and advanced his praises high  
 Among the heathen round;...  
 ...all the contest is now  
 ‘Twixt God and Dagon; Dagon hath presumed,  
 Me overthrown, to enter lists with God,  
 His deity comparing and preferring  
 Before the God of Abraham. (448-65)

All the Jews of the drama recognize this consequence of Samson’s actions. He, Manoa, and the Chorus lament Dagon’s presumption to equality with God. As the one who made this presumption possible, Samson is punished as one who abrogates the covenant.

Samson’s ability to so drastically affect God’s reputation among the nations is directly related to his status as God’s chosen instrument, or, in Shapiro’s term, *Eved Ha-Shem*, God’s servant. Shapiro quotes Deut. 7:6: “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the

LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself” (qtd. 88). This great honor does not come without its responsibilities, however. Israel’s status as servant of God means they must serve him: “Israel is chosen to live by the six hundred and thirteen commands of the Pentateuch; Israel is chosen to propagate the ethical precepts of the Pentateuch; Israel is chosen to spread the knowledge of the Pentateuch’s ethical precepts by example” (89). That is, God chose Israel to be the vessel through which he would show forth the glory of his name. The purpose of Israel’s honor is to offer to other nations and other individuals the chance to conform to God’s ways and become themselves servants of God.

As an Israelite, Samson’s charge is to fulfill this role of servant. As a judge, his charge is the same, except with some added responsibilities (abstaining from wine, keeping his hair long, freeing Israel). When he sins, he injures his status as God’s servant. Since the purpose of serving God is to show forth God’s glory and the righteousness of God’s ways, failing to serve God impugns God’s reputation among the Gentiles and is a desecration of the Name. The Hebrew characters of the drama accept that desecrating God’s Name is the greatest sin Samson commits and the sin for which Samson most needs to repent.

#### *Characters’ Concern for Chillul Ha-Shem*

Milton’s Samson exhibits a complicated relationship to the concept of *Chillul Ha-Shem*. First of all, his words display a deep concern for glorifying God’s name. He says time and time again that his deepest sorrow is the calumny his actions have brought upon his God (e.g. 557).

Samson also consistently blames himself for his predicament. When the chorus questions his Gentile marriages, he says, “She was not the prime cause, but I myself” of his slavery (234). When Manoa questions God, asking why God granted his prayer for a son if his son’s life would

end in chains, Samson defends God: “Sole author I, sole cause” (376). He does not shrink from Manoa’s accusation that Samson has dishonored God: “I this honour, I this pomp have brought / To Dagon” (449-50). When Dalila accuses Samson of judging her with a different standard than he uses to judge himself, he says, “I to myself was false ere thou to me” (824). To Harapha, Samson says, “I deserve” (1169) the punishments he has “Justly” (1171) received from God. In accepting the blame for his punishments, Samson is consistent throughout the drama.

Although he may see himself as somehow worthy of God’s election, the judge is also consistent in attributing his strength to God whenever the source of his strength comes into question. He refers to his “heaven-gifted strength” (36) and to “God, when he gave me strength” (58). To the Chorus, he says his hair and its strength are “the secret gift of God” (201). Contradicting his prideful lines, he excuses himself of the shortcomings of Israel’s leaders by saying they had seen “those great acts which God had done / Singly by me” (243-44). This confession of God as the ultimate source for his actions seems, in context, sincere enough to be taken seriously and to complicate the negative reading of Samson. Even as his words evince pride in his election, Israel’s judge emphasizes that he acted “Full of divine instinct” (526), not of his own power. “He led me on to mightiest deeds” (638), Samson says, appropriately if less humbly than he should, attributing his feats to God.

Samson’s defense of God as the source of his strength is most evident, of course, in his confrontation with Harapha. He proclaims, in words that sound like those of Joshua or of David before Goliath, “My trust is in the living God” (1140). He tries to turn the contest between Harapha and himself into a contest between their gods, daring the giant to experience “whose God is strongest” (1155).

Given his drama-long insistence upon God as the source of his strength, Samson's final words are shocking. A man who just spent an entire day of life defending his God from attacks of injustice and sorcery should know better than to proclaim his own strength to Gentiles. On the other hand, a man who spends his last day regretting that he can no longer attain the exalted status his election had before given him might well use this last moment of power as a chance to regain his past glory. Thus, both trajectories exist in the drama.

Here it is instructive to return to Rashi's understanding of Moses' prime fault. To Rashi, the sin for which Moses is most harshly punished is the sin the whole of Israel sees. It is not the gravity of the sinful action itself, but the effect the sin has upon the glory of God's name that concerns the rabbi. In the rabbinic and Hebrew mindset, then, the greatest question confronting the judge of Samson's character would be whether his actions and words ultimately bring glory to God.

All of Samson's prideful words he speaks in private, either to himself or while surrounded by other Israelites. The dynamic between Samson and the other Jews that converse with him helps to vindicate Samson. Whenever others question God's justice, Samson defends God with the *quid pro quo* nature of the Israelite and Nazirite covenants. Whenever, on the other hand, Samson comes too close to dishonoring God with his words, his father or the Chorus provide a counternarrative that allows God's reputation to remain intact.

Samson's is the first slip. In greeting the chorus, he complains that his strength and his wisdom are "proportioned ill," and that this disproportion is the reason for his sin (209). Immediately, however, the chorus responds, "Tax not divine disposal" (210). Soon thereafter, the chorus reminds Samson that "Just are the ways of God" (293). When Manoah laments asking God for a son, complaining that God fulfilled his wish in a way Samson's parents had not wanted,



Samson hastily corrects his father: “Appoint not heavenly disposition” (373). In an atypical circumstance, Samson and the Chorus then launch into a mutual complaint against God, whom they accuse of raising up Samson only to throw him down with force unfair (641-709).

Immediately upon Dalila’s arrival on the scene, however, Samson reverts to his defense of God’s justice, taking upon himself, and partially dispensing to Dalila, the blame for his degradation.

Wittreich’s objections come to mind. The critic argues that Samson’s harshness against himself and Dalila reveal his inordinately wrathful nature. Rather than wrath, however, Samson’s harshness may demonstrate his concern with God’s Name. Instead of refusing to accept Dalila’s offer of peaceful sloth, Samson chooses to uphold the truth that God’s punishments are just and not to be avoided.

Later, the chorus questions Samson’s initial refusal to go with the public officer, but Samson explains that going with the officer would amount to “venturing to displease / God for the fear of man, and man prefer, / Set God behind” (1373-75). When Samson changes his mind and decides to go with the officer, he cites “rousing motions” (1382) and insists that he will do nothing “that may dishonor / Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite” (1385-86). When he tells the officer of his decision to go to the temple, he makes sure to include in his speech that he intends “in nothing to comply / Scandalous or forbidden in our Law” (1408-10). Although his motivations may be selfish, he takes care to preserve God’s honor in front of the officer and all other Philistine characters. Samson’s last words to fellow Jews are spoken to the Chorus: he promises to do “Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy / Our God, our Law, my nation, or myself” (1424-25). Recognizing that God’s honor is once more at stake, the chorus blesses Samson as he walks away: “Go, and the Holy One / Of Israel be thy guide / To what may serve his glory best, and spread his name / Great among the heathen round” (1427-30).

In his interactions with his co-religionists, Samson sometimes doubts God or challenges God's justice. However, Shapiro notes that Israelites are free to challenge God under the covenant, since the covenant includes God's promise to bless Israel (79). Shapiro mentions Abraham, Jacob, and Moses as examples of righteous men who challenge God (79), and some of the Old Testament prophets also assert this right. Moreover, Samson and the Chorus never challenge God's justice in front of Philistines, for if they were to doubt God in front of the heathen, they would be guilty of desecration of the Name. Since they keep such musing among themselves, however, all the words Samson addresses to Philistines contribute to the glorification of the Name.

#### *Samson's Pride*

Despite Samson's words, however, he also returns time and time again to the personal dishonor he loathes and fears. In this respect, Milton's Samson is portrayed in a much harsher light than is the rabbinical Samson. Firstly, Milton makes much of Samson's moral weakness to women. Thus, Samson bewails that he "weakly to a woman must reveal" the secret of his hair (50), and he chides his own "impotence of mind" (52). Soon after, he calls himself "Fool" because he "divulged the secret gift of God / To a deceitful woman" (201-2).

Samson expects his name to become a proverb of foolishness and weakness in Israel (203-5). Indeed, God often threatens similar curses when Israel disobeys. Jeremiah warns Judah several times that they will become "an execration, and an astonishment, and a curse, and a reproach" (Jer. 42:18). The exact same wording is used in Jer. 44:12. Similar language is used throughout the book of Jeremiah; God curses Bozrah in the same way: "Bozrah shall become a desolation, a reproach, a waste, and a curse" (49:13).

Including this prediction in Samson's lines adds a layer of despair not included in (although also not excluded from) the biblical text. At this point in the drama, Milton's Samson is very harsh on himself. Because this sort of introspective monologue is rare in Judges, Samson's despair is not explicit in the source text. There is no indication in Judges that Samson ever thinks about more than his desire for revenge for his eyes, implying that he blames the Philistines rather than himself. Milton's Samson, however, is more insightful and potentially humbler than his biblical counterpart.

When Manoa cautions Samson not to be overly harsh on himself because that reveals concern for one's own pride over concern for God, Samson's next lines display just such pride. Samson says he has lost his reason for living because he has been so humbled by his own mistake:

...but as for life,  
 To what end should I seek it? when in strength  
 All mortals I excelled, and great in hopes  
 With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts  
 Of birth from heaven foretold and high exploits,  
 Full of divine instinct, after some proof  
 Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond  
 The sons of Anak, famous now and blazed,  
 Fearless of danger, like a petty god  
 I walked about admired of all and dreaded  
 On hostile ground, none daring my affront. (521-31)

Samson's greatest concern here, despite his claim that his depression stems from causing the desecration of God's Name (448-71), is with the desecration of his own status as God's chosen servant. The true cause of his depression, it seems, is the reversal of his own fortunes. While yet in God's favor, Samson gloried in his own strength, enjoying the admiration of his people and the fear of the Philistines. He thought of himself as "a petty god." When his pride led him to think he could dismiss the temptations Dalila would exert upon him, however, he lost the respect of all who used to fear him. This loss is the reason he loses hope in life. He can "implore" God's forgiveness (521), but he has no hope to regain his lost pride. One would expect a more humble man to react more strongly to the knowledge of having failed God than to the loss of his own esteem. One would also expect a more humble man to count God's forgiveness a significant hope. For Samson, however, forgiveness without reinstatement into his former place of reverence is useless in sublunar life.

Thus, he despairs of life before his father because he can no longer be as proud as he was before. He also laments his fall from "useful" servant (564) to "pitied object" (568) and "Vain monument of strength" (570); he spends more time on the "mightiest deeds" (638) he will no longer be able to perform than he spends on the dishonor he has brought to God's name; when he is summoned to the temple to entertain the Philistines, he at first refuses, concerned that his appearance would be "The worst of all indignities, yet on me. / Joined with extreme contempt" (1341-42). All these words seem to indicate an unregenerate Samson whose pride never leaves him and for whom his own calumny is more unbearable than God's.

Samson's pride is no novel discovery. Shapiro mentions Josephus' diagnosis that Samson's sins resulted from "excess pride" and that Christian interpreters agreed with this diagnosis (272, n. 160). Like all pride, Samson's is a reversal of the natural order. If Samson had

stayed within his natural relationship with God—the relationship of the creature with the creator—he would have understood his position as an instrument of God’s deliverance. Instead, Samson sees himself as specially favored. Instead of taking the angelic annunciation of his birth as a sign that God planned to deliver Israel, Samson sees that annunciation as a sign of God’s favor toward him as an individual. As Shapiro’s analysis of the concept of judge indicates, Samson’s attitude reveals a misinterpretation of how God chooses delivering judges and of what it means to be such a judge.

Relevant to a discussion of Samson’s pride, of course, is Milton’s omission of the judge’s final prayer and his addition of the words “of my own accord.” At the end of his life, Samson gives the reader one final reminder that he is still self-absorbed. To Samson, who misreads the situation, the talionic justice at work in the moment is his revenge upon the Philistines for the insults they have heaped upon him. He, in turn, will heap the temple upon them. His concern, again, is for his own honor, not the glorification of God’s name.

### *Manoah*

Manoa’s constant concern with God’s glory and his own obligation as both father and Israelite to ransom Samson, combined with his very wise advice to his son, show this character’s Hebrew wisdom. The rabbis differ on their interpretations of Manoah. One tradition sees the father of Samson as a foolish man whose wife was more deserving of begetting a judge than he was of fathering one. Thus, Abravanel teaches that the angel who announced Samson’s birth appeared to Manoah’s wife because she was wiser than her husband (Rosenburg 109). He also teaches that Manoah’s wife was cautious when reporting to him that an angel had visited her, for “this would imply that the angel appeared to her since she was greater than Manoah” (110c). The

same rabbi also notes that Manoah did not realize he and his wife had seen an angel until the angel disappears in Judges 13:21, whereas his wife was wise enough to recognize the fact sooner (114).

The tradition of “the Sages,” however, sees Manoah as a righteous man who deserved an extraordinary son (Scherman 195). Milton follows this tradition when he creates the character Manoa, for the character in the drama prioritizes God’s glory and the Covenant and shows himself to be wise. He does not take his son’s opinion for his own, but consistently judges Samson’s actions according to whether or not they result in Israel’s good—and, therefore, in God’s glory. Because he never believes his son’s claim to be divinely inspired to dispense with the Law by marrying Gentiles, Manoa’s opinion of Samson’s inspiration coincides with Wittreich’s. Because he holds this position consistently and consistently thinks of the good of others—God and his son—he avoids the dismissal other, more deceptive, characters may experience.

Manoa does exhibit one inconsistency in his sorrow for Samson’s reversal of fortune (356-72). In these lines, Manoa questions God’s loving character, asking why God granted his request for a son only to dash Samson to the ground after a short life: “Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt / Our earnest prayers, then given with solemn hand / As graces, draw a scorpion’s tail behind” (358-60). While Manoa’s concern for his son may make him a more sympathetic character, it also demonstrates the complaint allowed to “Old Testament man” in Shapiro’s paradigm. Under the Covenant, Shapiro argues, Israel could “challenge God and...declare that God does not live up to his obligations” (79).

Manoa’s fault, of course, is in overlooking Samson’s responsibilities under that covenant. Samson is quick to remind his father that he is responsible for all his own troubles: “Sole author

I, sole cause” (376). To his credit, once reminded that Samson has brought his punishment upon himself, Manoa accepts his son’s culpability for the rest of the drama. He responds to Samson’s reminder by saying that keeping God’s secret “was in thy power; true” (430). Reprimanded by his son, Manoa acknowledges that Samson deserves his punishment, admonishes Samson to be more concerned with God’s honor than with his own (514-15), and then turns his attention to trying to free Samson from prison.

Milton’s interpretation of Samson’s father is informed by and dialogues with rabbinic tradition but is not as instructive as some other concerns. Manoa demonstrates Hebraic concerns, strengthening Shapiro’s claim that the drama is Hebraic, but the differences between Milton and the rabbis on this character are not defining.

### *Beginning Salvation*

Another of the reservations keeping critics from accepting Samson’s regeneration is that the judge’s actions do not free Israel from the Philistines. Serjeantson, acknowledging David Norbrook and Robert Thomas Fallon, notes that negative interpreters of Samson “have sometimes pointed out that Samson’s slaughter does not immediately result in ‘Honour...and freedom’ for Israel” (630 and n. 101). Serjeantson defends his position by arguing that “this was not a stumbling block for early-modern interpreters of Judges,” who “knew that [Samson] had begun a task that was...‘reserved for *David* to do’” (630).

Like early modern commentators, the rabbis were also unfazed by Samson’s partial success. When the angel tells Manoah’s wife what she should do to keep Samson holy, he predicts, “he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines” (Jud. 13:5).

According to Radak and other commentators, this verse means, “In his lifetime it will begin, but it will continue even after his death” (Rosenburg 110b).

Both the rabbinic and early modern traditions state that Samson’s holocaust does, indeed, result in honor and some measure of freedom for Israel. Arguing that Milton intended a different reading in his drama requires textual evidence from the post-holocaust scene, but no evidence is apparent to contradict the temple destruction’s salvation for Israel. If, in turn, Samson’s final act begins Israel’s salvation, then he has, at last, fulfilled the prophecy of his birth.

Daniel notes that “God’s prophecies are based not on force but on foreknowledge” (75). Thus, when he prophesied through an angel that Samson would begin the deliverance of Israel, God knew that he would accomplish this impartial salvation through his elected judge. The manner in which Samson fulfills this prophecy, however, is for Samson to determine. Although God does not will sin, *De Doctrina* does note instances in the Bible when God “urge[s] on a criminal although he is in no sense the cause of his crime” (qtd. 75). That is, God uses human sin, which he has nevertheless not willed into existence, by directing it one way or another; he “points it in this or that direction” (qtd. 75). In this way, God uses sin to accomplish his will without willing the sin to begin with. The consequences, then, of Samson’s sinful liaisons with Gentile women and of his personal vengeance against thirty uninvolved Philistines are God’s will. Similarly, the final holocaust fulfills God’s prophecy and his will, whether Samson’s motivation is holy or not.

This reading leaves room for one of Wittreich’s points: that *Samson Agonistes* was originally published with *Paradise Regained*. Whereas critics in the positive school see this fact as an indication that Samson should be read as a prefiguration of Christ, critics in the negative school see it as a way for Milton to highlight the differences between the two saviors (e.g.



Wittreich, “*Samson Agonistes*,” 122). Again, these two interpretations need not form a dichotomy. As an Old Testament figure, Samson is necessarily—to a Christian audience that believes in typologies—an incomplete savior. Samson defends the old, Abrahamic covenant; Christ fulfills the law of that covenant and extends the blessing to Gentiles. Thus, in such a reading, allegorically as well as literally, Samson only begins to free Israel. Just as David ultimately frees the Israelites from the Philistines, so the Son of David ultimately frees Israel from the bondage of sin (c.f. Milton’s identification of sin with slavery and the biblical precedent for that identification).

To accomplish his great salvific task, Christ, according to orthodox thought, must be sinless. Thus, Milton reasons, “The aim of this miraculous conception was to evade the pollution of Adam’s sin” (*Christian Doctrine* 428). Samson, however, was no sacrifice but a deliverer. Christ is a sacrifice and a model, but Samson is required to be only a tool. Since Samson’s task is to effect physical, not moral, freedom for Israel, it is not his morality, but the physical effects of his actions that must glorify God. Moreover, the angel that announced his birth prophesied that he would *begin* to deliver Israel, lowering the moral requisites for his judgeship even more. That is, the success of Christ’s mission depends on his not dishonoring God either privately or publicly. The success of Samson’s mission, however, depends only upon his ability to increase God’s glory among the nations. In this way, Samson is like Moses before him; he may incur personal punishment for private sin, but his public sin is greater, for it affects God’s reputation. This theme of rabbinic tradition suggests, then, that one should judge Samson’s holocaust by its effects on God’s glory rather than by Samson’s own intentions for it.

## Reconciliation

Milton's dialogue with the rabbis, with the Judges text, and with the gospels has led critics to deeply entrenched opposing views of Samson. However, the reading of *Samson Agonistes* that Clay Daniel posits moves toward a synthesis of the regenerationist and degenerationist interpretations of the drama. Invoking the critical question of what it means to call a play a Christian tragedy, Daniel argues that Samson is unregenerate, but he also argues that the temple holocaust fulfills the prophecy given at Samson's birth. Thus, God's will for the deliverance of Israel is accomplished even through Samson's errors. Daniel's essential point is that "though providence fulfills God's prophecy, the play is a tragedy because this is the way Samson, not God, chooses to fulfill it. The way in which the prophecy is fulfilled is as terrible as anything to be seen in Greek tragedy, yet it is completely justifiable within a Christian context" (87).

Daniel's conclusion provides an alternative to Wittreich's despairing view of *Samson*. The latter critic sees the drama's tragic trajectory as fixed, irremediable, and opposed to the comic end of the Christ story. Daniel's paradigm, however, sees hope in the tragedy. Rather than claim with regenerationist critics that the image of the phoenix at the end of the drama expresses hope for Samson in the afterlife, Daniel suggests that the image gives hope to the nation of Israel. Thus, out of the ashes of Samson's vengeance comes Israel's life, but not Samson's.

Daniel's reinterpretation of the phoenix symbol is a shade darker than the interpretation of regenerationist critics, who like to read Milton's politics into *Samson Agonistes*, identifying the protagonist with the Good Old Cause, dead but able to rise again (Serjeantson 613-14). While Daniel's synthesis, in its totally negative reading of the character Samson, complicates the comparison between Samson and the Good Old Cause, it still provides hope. The principle at

work in the drama is that God's will for the good of Zion will prevail despite—even through—the failures of those elected to effect God's will. Even should England or the Puritans or Milton fail utterly in their moral charge, what God foreknows will still come to pass. *Samson Agonistes* gives no hope for Samson, but it gives plenty of hope for the nation. Likewise, the drama gives no immediate hope, but it promises freedom for many out of the darkness of the historical moment.

The ultimate outcome of the drama in this paradigm suggests an incompletely regenerate Samson, but it need not suggest a completely unregenerate or reprobate Samson. The protagonist's pride never leaves him, but he does come to recognize some of his faults. He confesses to having brought his judgment upon his own head, and he shows concern for the glorification of God's name, especially before the heathen. He never fully repents, so he does not qualify to re-inherit Abraham's blessing, but he does remember his covenant relationship with God, and the rest of his people benefit from the Abrahamic Covenant through Samson's massacre.

As a man not after God's own heart, Milton's Samson is an incomplete type of King David, just as he is an incomplete type of Christ. Not only does he only begin the salvation that David (and the Son of David) will complete, but his life is not morally instructive to those who follow. He repents, but incompletely, and he values God's honor, but only secondarily to his own. That God still accomplishes the deliverance of the Israelites through such a fallen character gives hope to those oppressed at the moment of the temple holocaust and to those looking forward to a more complete salvation. Just so, a typological reading of Samson demonstrates that God's redemptive will comes to pass both for the Israelites in the moment and for the world through Christ, who fulfills both prophecy and the Law.

Seeing Samson as a type of Christ, but as an incomplete type, moves toward reconciling the regenerationist and unregenerationist critical camps. Recognizing the faults of Samson's life does not necessitate that scholars either condemn or approve all the character's actions in the drama. Although Samson's violence proceeds from impure motivations, it serves a freeing purpose for Israel, fulfilling the prophecy given at Samson's birth and fitting the concept of a delivering judge. A middle line exists between the complete exaltation and the complete condemnation of Milton's Samson. Manoa's final hope for his son may be misplaced, but the reader's is firmly established by the play's invocation of the greater salvation that comes in *Paradise Regained*.

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